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Commencement address

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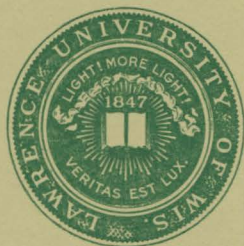
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LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY

APPLETON, WISCONSIN



COMMENCEMENT

JUNE 14, 1970

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

GEORGE WILLIAM SMALLEY

*Chairman, Department of Slavic Languages
Lawrence University*

This is a very tough year for commencement speakers. We are expected to be optimistic and positive while our political leaders tell us that the swapping of 45,000 dead and 250,000 wounded American kids to maintain our regime in Saigon is necessary for the security of our country. We are expected to talk about sweetness and light when progress has halted in achieving for our minorities social and economic justice, that is, fancy words for minimum human decency. We are to be rah-rah when the majority of Americans, glutted already with things, are destroying the air and water in their hell-bent pursuit of whiter whites, more, bigger and faster cars, and sweat-free bodies. We are supposed to be upward and onward when so many of our students, when not rehearsing for a circus freak show, are busy burning and disrupting our universities — the one institution we have dedicated to truth and beauty.

By reaching down deep into the bottom of the faculty barrel for a commencement speaker, you have demonstrated a lack of interest in the traditional commencement address. Let me respond by trying to avoid the traditional clichés.

Having cast aside the commencement talk formulas and facing the problem of what to say to you, I thought initially I would transmit to you all my worldly wisdom. But then I was told my talk had to last more than thirty-seven seconds; so while still hoping to set a record for commencement address brevity, let me say a few words about your favorite subject — you.

I didn't come here to praise you, because you know the hopes we have for you and because you so repeatedly praise yourselves much more eloquently than I ever could hope to do.

The two major faults of your generation are, I believe, a deadly lack of a sense of humor and an incredible amount of naiveté.

I realize that no group which possesses the truth, be it Puritan or Communist, is ever particularly funny. Yet you offer us such an abundance of targets: your lemming-like originality in appearance, your music, dance and Woodstocks, your persistent, perverse worship of the ugly, your desperate desire to be treated simultaneously as an adult and as a child, your cultural heroes whether they be Che Guevara or Tiny Tim, your playing at poverty and revolution, your hairsplitting legalism and, above all, your incredible pomposity — your fantastic, monumental pomposity.

Whenever I am feeling very seedy and middle aged, my antidote is a conversation with a student leader, after which I realize how youthful, humorous, and alive I really am. I sometimes feel that we are teaching future bureaucrats for the Austro-Hungarian empire. Only the jowls and monocle are missing.

Now next to air, water, and food, the most important requisite for human survival is humor. Life is hard; it was and, at times, will be harder. Without humor you'll drown in your own sentimentality and self-pity.

Your generation — well educated, sophisticated in many areas — remains, it seems to me, terribly naive, particularly concerning life and human relationships.

For example, you cannot seem to understand that adulthood in our culture does not depend upon chronological age, but upon economic self-sufficiency. You naively expect that, because you can create a child or fire a gun, you are then automatically to be numbered among the adult members of the tribe. Nonsense. Only when you've killed your lion — that is, are making it on your own — only then can we treat you as an equal.

A University education is a priceless thing, but it does not and cannot teach you all you need to know to live. A worker or a business man will want to know what right you have to teach him about Viet Nam when you know nothing of life as he knows it. He can't take you seriously. Nor can we adults take your protestations of liberalism, anti-materialism, or love, love, love seriously until we see you live, on your own, some kind of life markedly different from our own. Your generation has been very vocal in its condemnation of adult ways of living. Let us hope now that this amounts to more than mere words. I suspect we would all be horrified to know how many of you in a very brief time will be money-grubbing, wife-swapping, upper middle, lily white, country club, snob bigots whose politics will be based on taxes and whose morality will be founded on convenience and discretion.

You are extremely naive in your demands on life. Now it is one thing to demand perpetual happiness from life. I'm a sucker myself for lost causes, and the David versus Goliath scene turns me on. But it is quite another thing to fall into deep depression whenever one of your demands isn't met. And this you do with monotonous regularity. In so many ways you remind me of the heroine of a wretched teenybopper song written a few years ago. In this song a girl was running away from home not because her parents beat her or didn't feed, house, clothe, educate, and love her; no, she was running away because her parents didn't give her any fun. Her parents, it seems, had failed to be imaginative recreation directors. Don't expect life to provide you with perpetual fun. If you're full, have a warm place to go in winter, someone to love, something interesting to work on, and are not in pain, then consider yourself blest. You will have some good days and some terrible days, but mostly life is like a small cavity or a pimple on your nose; it doesn't really hurt, but oh, how it annoys. How it is that you don't seem to grasp this after reading history and literature I don't know; unless it is that you are so involved in tracing the history of institutions or in searching out the artistic devices that you no longer can see the forests because of the trees. Well, in any event, let us hope that these unrealistic demands on life will pass, perhaps as the last vestiges of your psychological acne.

A large part of your naiveté comes from growing up protected and isolated from life. It is fashionable nowadays to talk about the poorness of a ghetto education. While this may be true on an academic level, when it comes to questions of living, I knew so much more than you at your age. Perhaps what we really need is a crash Head Start program of life education for the suburbs.

The process of suburbanization, or retreat from life, involves erecting as many barriers as possible between you and life. Geographical barriers are followed by economic, class, race, religious, generational ones. The old are exiled to Arizona or Florida, death is shunned by keeping terminal cases semi-vegetables in a hospital, money replaces love, parents don't quarrel in front of children, work and strife and differences are banished forever. Heaven is a ranch house with Doris Day, twenty minutes from a commuter train and the golf course.

The car becomes everything: you shop in a car, bank in a car, go to church in a car; you love in a car, take the kids to school in a car, go to work in a car, and finally, appropriately, die in a car. Soon I am sure Forest Lawn will design some special crypts where you and the car can spend eternity together.

Please don't suburbanize your soul. Don't get yourself into the position where you have to go to a sensitivity session in order to behave as a human. Don't be cowards; move back to the city. Raise your kids with blacks and orientals, Catholics and Jews, rich and poor. Give your children the opportunity to see life as it is. Maybe if some of you had known some old junkies, you wouldn't be so tempted to fool around with your mind and body now. Don't run away from life. Understand that you can't have life without death, happiness without sorrow, or progress without conflict.

As it is hard enough for me to get through a day, I am in no position to tell you how to live. But I know that, though life is messy, it is better to embrace it fully than to walk zombie-like through it. It is better to suffer than to feel nothing. Remember that people are people and not columns of figures. Don't be a bureaucrat, but feel and have compassion.

Now, if I am going to have a chance at Lawrence's record for commencement address brevity, I had better begin to close.

Parting is always hardest on those who remain behind, so that it's more difficult for us to bid farewell to you, than for you, who have all sorts of new, interesting, exciting things ahead. We have helped each other to change and develop during these last four years, and let us hope that the developments continue at an equal pace for us all. Part of you will always remain here with us, while I hope you'll be taking away something of us besides course credit and a diploma.

My wife has said of me that I'm the emotional type who can cry at supermarket openings. So before I dissolve right before your very eyes, let me say, on behalf of all those who remain behind — Goodbye, good luck, and make us proud of you.